

FWIW (For What it's Worth)

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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27 September, 2020



As this year rolls along, we are coming upon a year-long season of anniversary celebration, commemoration, and contemplation about the past – and the future – of our Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, for all that it is worth, beginning with the 140th anniversary of the founding of our church, this coming November 8.

And as we get ready to look at our church's history, it is worth looking at our *larger* tradition's history – specifically, the Universalist tradition on which we were founded.

Next week, some of you will have an opportunity to join a continental service, hosted by the Murray Grove retreat centre, near the site where it is considered that Universalism historically arrived in North America 250 years ago. And as we consider that, it is also worth getting some sense of where – and *when* – Universalism came from. Looking *beyond* those 250 years in North America, as well as looking into *what* it has come to mean for us, here, now.

Now, I'm not going to go into an extensive historical account of Universalism today. It is a fascinating story, and one which can get... very specific, and perhaps technical, with very close readings of biblical scripture, as well as seeking to apply a critical understanding of

historical *and* contemporary use of language. Over the coming year, we might delve more deeply into parts of that history and what it continues to mean for us. For today, I'm inviting you to share in some of the basics, as we gear up for this year's celebrations.

For some of you, this might be a kind of review, particularly those of you who grew up in this church, and especially if you were around when it was a Universalist church, before merging and becoming Unitarian Universalist.

But you might be up for a refresher, especially if you're newer to our tradition, or new to the Universalist heritage of this church, which is a bit different than most UU congregations in Canada that generally spawn from the *Unitarian* roots.

Now, one of the quirks of both the Universalist and the Unitarian traditions is that their names come from *very* specific doctrinal schools in Christian theology, which has often been remarked as paradoxical, since both Unitarianism and Universalism – as well as the newer merged Unitarian Universalist denomination – are characterized by a lack of attachment to doctrine. And in both traditions, the Christian elements have often come to represent a smaller proportion of the theological thought expressed in our communities.

For our shared reference, the *Unitarian* doctrine was a rejection of the *trinitarian* conception of divinity. And *Universalism* rejected the doctrine of eternal punishment in an afterlife – that is to say, it proclaimed *universal* salvation – a statement that every single person is worthy of the same love.

But, if you've been attending our services for a while, you might have noticed that we don't really talk very much about these specific doctrines and whether or not we reject them. And we tend not to make many claims about afterlife, recognizing that, among you, there are different expectations of what happens after death. And accepting the

coexistence of these diverse theologies has become a hallmark of both of our parent traditions.

So, it might seem easy to dismiss the doctrinal roots of our namesakes – Unitarianism and Universalism – as vestigial remnants from a different time, when our congregations were clearly under the Christian protestant umbrella – something that is a much fuzzier question nowadays.

And yet, the spirit of these roots continues to drive theological thought and development among our communities, not least being the fact that Universalist and Unitarian attitudes were labelled as heresies rebelling against some of the established norms in the history of Christian churches.

And while we may no longer spend a lot of time debating the details of how the conception of divinity might be structured – and in our case, the... mechanics of an afterlife – these roots, for all they are worth, continue to inspire how we look at the world and how we develop spiritually. From an openness to ongoing revelation that is not sealed, to a steadfast commitment toward radical inclusion.

So, let's pause for a moment today, before we contemplate where we are, and where we want to go, and consider where we come from.

The universalist approach may seem new and radical, and in a larger historical sense, it is. But looking further to the early Christian church, we also see evidence that types of universalism, rejecting eternal damnation and punishment in afterlife, were considered by the early church – and to some extent – accepted.

These are the kinds of “small u” universalisms, referring to theological concepts, rather than our “big U” Universalism, that speaks specifically about the name of our denomination. “Small u” universalism is also sometimes called “classical” universalism, to distinguish it from the

Universalism label that has become the name of our church's founding tradition.

We can see one of the earliest documented versions of this “small u” universalism, in the works of Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria, by the third century. And several of his near contemporaries agreed.

Now, there is debate as *to what* extent Origen was a card-carrying universalist... his work is sometimes ambiguous and might even be seen as contradictory, but it is clear that his writings set out a universalist understanding as a serious proposal, with robust theological reasoning and drawing directly from scriptural texts.

As with many things, there have been several manifestations of the universalist spirit throughout history. They range from merely posing the *possibility* of universal salvation – sometimes called “potential universalism”, to an absolute conviction that all people are guaranteed an afterlife in paradise, immediately upon death – this is sometimes called “unqualified universalism” in academic circles, but it is also sometimes known by the more metal-sounding name of “death and glory” – the kind of phrase that you might see on silk-screened black t-shirts at a heavy metal concert.

There is an in-between interpretation, in which everyone is guaranteed a punishment-free afterlife... eventually. In this scenario, people might spend some time in a purgatory-style period when the soul is to be purified and *restored* unto blessedness. And the time that this might take would depend on the type of life one led, and how one related to the redeeming figure of Christ. This is academically called “qualified universalism”, and more popularly as “restorationism”.

This latter version of universalism is perhaps the one that Origen proposed, and the one that you might see among Christians that also lean toward a universalist view. Because it is also worth noting that there are currently Christian-identifying communities that espouse this

“small u” universalism. This current exists alongside our denomination and is often called Christian Universalism.

And, while this classical universalism is no longer a... complete description of how our theologies emerge in our particular church’s community, it is worth taking a look at what it has meant. It is part of our heritage, which continues to inform our faith, and continues to inform how we live our lives.

My friends, whatever your views on what happens after this life, the key value that every person’s life is worthy of acceptance, embracing their whole selves, including recognizing their inevitable faults, continues to be a founding principle of our communities.

My friends, the first Unitarian Universalist principle is a covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The Universalist spirit stands at the foundation of our community of faith, and the foundation of our life of faith.

My friends, for what it’s worth, this is a heritage to celebrate.

My friends, for what it’s worth, this is a life to honour.

So may it be,
In Solidarity,
Amen

Opening Hymn #298 Wake, Now, My Senses

~)-| W: Thomas J. S. Mikelson, 1936- , © Thomas J. S. Mikelson
M: Traditional Irish melody, harmony by Carlton R. Young, 1926- ,
renewal © 1992 Abingdon Press
SLANE 10.10.10.10.

Hymn #1058 Be Ours a Religion

~)-| Words: Theodore Parker, 1810-1860
~)-| Thomas Benjamin, 1940- , © 1998 Yelton Rhodes Music (ASCAP). Used by permission

Closing Hymn #148 Let Freedom Span Both East and West

Words: Anonymous
~)-| Music: Betsy Jo Angebrandt, 1931- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association
CHRISTMAS HYMN L.M.